



Review

Pedagogical principles underpinning undergraduate Nurse Education in the UK: A review



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ABSTRACT

Background: This review provides a contextual report of the current use of pedagogy in undergraduate nursing programmes run by Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in the United Kingdom (UK). Pedagogy provides the framework for educators to add shape and structure to the educational process, and to support student learning and programme development. Traditionally nurse education has used a behaviourist approach focusing on learning outcomes and competency based education, although there is also increasing support for the cognitive/student learning focused pedagogic approach.

Design: The keywords andragogy, pedagogy and student centred learning were used in a systematic stepwise descriptive content analysis of the programme specifications and programme handbooks of 40 current undergraduate programme documents, leading to an undergraduate award and professional registration as a nurse.

Results: 42% (17) of documents contained reference to the words, pedagogy and student centred learning, whilst no documents used the word andragogy. Where identified, pedagogy was used in a superficial manner, with only three documents identifying a specific pedagogical philosophy: one HEI citing a value based curriculum and two HEIs referencing social constructionism. Nine HEIs made reference to student centred learning but with no additional pedagogic information. A review of teaching, learning and assessment strategies indicated no difference between the documented strategies used by HEIs when comparing those with an espoused pedagogy and those without.

Conclusion: Although educational literature supports the use of pedagogic principles in curriculum design, this is not explicit in undergraduate nursing programme documentation, and suggests that nurse educators do not view pedagogy as important to their programmes. Instead programmes appear to be developed based on operational and functional requirements with a focus on acquisition of knowledge and skills, and the fitness to practice of graduates entering the nursing workforce.

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1. Introduction

This paper reports on a descriptive step wise review of the pedagogical underpinnings present in 40 undergraduate pre-registration nursing programmes currently run by United Kingdom (UK) based Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). This paper adopts *Ironside's (2001)* understanding of pedagogy as an all-encompassing idea represented as, “a way of thinking about and comportment within education” (p73).

Pedagogy is important as it provides the framework for educators to add shape and structure to the educational process and student experience, and educators are clear that an explicit pedagogy is essential as the underpinning of any course or programme of study to ensure direction and cohesion (*Clark, 2005; Kahl and Venette, 2010*).

Within the higher education sector the place of pedagogy has been less prominent as academics focus on their area of specialist knowledge rather than their role as educators (*Hobson and Morrison-Saunders, 2013*). Nurses enter educational roles to pass on their professional knowledge and expertise, and the how and why of this “passing on” is much less clear, and often takes second place to the perceived need of providing theory dense programmes and course content (*Horsfall et al., 2012; Welch, 2011; Chambers et al., 2013*).

Additionally nurse education in the UK has undergone an extended period of transformation, moving from hospital based non-graduate apprenticeship programmes based in Schools of Nursing, to its current place as an established HEI undergraduate award. The pace of these educational changes has been rapid and when linked to the current fast paced changes within health care providers and clinical practice, has resulted in the focus on underpinning pedagogical approaches being neglected (*Lindahl et al., 2009; Kantor, 2009; Chambers et al., 2013*).

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Against this complex background, this review aims to provide a contextual report on the current state of pedagogy within undergraduate nurse education.

2. Literature review

All professional nurse education within the UK takes place within HEIs and is validated by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), however there is no specific professional guidance on the role of pedagogy or the pedagogical approach best suited to provide high quality professional nurse education.

Because of its traditional non-HEI background, nurse education has tended to assume a traditional behaviouristic pedagogical approach. Ironside (2001) identifies traditional pedagogy as associated with outcomes or competency based education, and as such it's particularly useful for efficient accumulation of information by students to meet specific learning outcomes. It assumes that learning is rational orderly and sequential, and that information or phenomena can be deconstructed into constituent parts to aid teaching. This in turn means it is largely content driven and teacher led, establishing the teacher's knowledge as superior to the students and the teacher as the determinant of what constitutes knowledge.

The persistence of traditional behaviouristic pedagogic approaches is ongoing and both Horsfall et al. (2012) and Welch (2011) continue to identify nurse educators' concentration on skill, knowledge acquisition and measurable outcomes. This is compounded by the introduction of high volume student numbers resulting in a dependence on teacher led pedagogic approaches (Carr, 2008). As Quinn (2007) argues, this ensures that nurse education programmes become largely instrumental, "their purpose is the production of a nursing workforce that is equipped to deal with the demands of the role and vocational relevance is therefore a key principle" (p1).

However the use of traditional pedagogic approaches has been criticised by a number of educationalists including Quinn (2007) who poses a fundamental question about the nature of nurse education and the curriculum; is it a set of objectives, a range of subject matter, or a student experience? Rejection of the traditional pedagogic approaches leads to the exploration of alternative paradigms which are frequently seen as competing or dichotomous.

Johnson et al. (2009), Horsfall et al. (2012) and Sadler (2012) contrast the behaviourist teacher/content orientated approach against the cognitive student/learning orientated approach where the educator is attempting to change the students' world view or thinking. This cognitive pedagogy also has implications for the nature of knowledge, recognising that knowledge is no longer fixed, but instead is socially constructed and personal. This altered perception of the nature of knowledge means that the transmission of knowledge can no longer be linear from educator to student, but may be circuitous and non-logical. Student centred learning approaches have also been regarded as a preparation for ongoing lifelong learning (Chambers et al., 2013).

The student centred approach is also in keeping with the andragogical or humanistic approach to education (Milligan, 1997), which through its focus on the individual student mirrors the individual care that professional nursing practice strives to prioritise.

Proponents of student centred learning such as Hockings (2009) explore the potential for it to replace the more traditional pedagogies, and suggest that there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate its effectiveness in encouraging deep learning and student engagement. Allen (2010) argues strongly for a paradigm shift in nursing pedagogy which places students and their development at the centre of the educational process, enabling them to move from passive recipients of knowledge to fuller engagement in the educational process, through the development of autonomy, empowerment and skills for lifelong learning whilst Zepke et al. (2006) suggest that student centred learning may even improve retention.

Regardless of the claims made for these competing pedagogies, educational approaches have been heavily criticised for the lack of evidence upon which these pedagogical approaches have been based (Clark, 2005; Kahl and Venette, 2010) e.g. problem based learning and reflective practice. Although a key tenet of nurse education is evidence based practice, educational practice has limited underpinning evidence. Additionally educational studies tend to be small scale, short term and single site. Brown et al. (2008) argues that nurse educationalists need to increase their "pedagogical literacy" (p283) and in the United States of America (USA) a position paper from the National League for Nursing (2005) has challenged nurse educators to develop research based pedagogies.

Horsfall et al. (2012) suggest that part of the difficulty with an underpinning pedagogy lies in the lack of willingness amongst educators to engage in critical debate on teaching and learning, and this has led to a resultant devaluing of terms such as empowerment, critical and student centred. In addition Kantor (2009) argues that the current rapid health care changes in clinical practice must be matched by changes in nurse education, to ensure the best preparation for future qualified nurses for the clinical environment and challenges they will face.

The clear confusion and debate apparent within the pedagogical nursing literature ensure that the following review of pedagogy within UK based undergraduate nurse education is timely.

3. Method

This review took place in May 2015 and adopted a systematic step wise approach to descriptive content analysis. The first step consisted of searching for all available published undergraduate pre-registration nursing curricula from the UK which were in the public domain. The NMC provides information about approved programme providers and from this 68 approved HEIs which offer full time undergraduate pre-registration adult nursing programmes in the UK were identified; 2 in Northern Ireland, 10 in Scotland, 5 in Wales and the remainder in England.

A Google search was then carried out for each of the NMC approved HEIs linked to the key words; nursing, adult and pre-registration. A further search was then carried out on each HEI own website using their own site search tool. At this stage a further key search term, programme specification was added and used in combination with the key terms above. A total of 40 documents were retrieved or 59% of the total available; 60% for England, 100% for Northern Ireland, 60% for Scotland and 20% for Wales.

Table 1 gives details of the numbers of programme specifications or equivalent documents retrieved.

Equivalence in documentation is difficult to determine as all HEIs published differently structured documents, however as this study intended to review the programmes' aims, learning outcomes and teaching/learning strategy, any current documentation which contained this level of information was included in the review, consequently a total of 31 (77%) documents labelled programme specifications and 9 (23%) documents labelled programme handbooks were included in the review.

Documents retrieved demonstrated considerable variation in length; from 8 pages to 157 pages, they also included varying numbers of programme aims and learning outcomes, with overall aims ranging from 1–22 and programme learning outcomes ranging from 6–57. Formatting of learning outcomes also varied; with some programme specific, some year specific and some based around three or four domains most commonly; Knowledge and Understanding, Subject Specific Skills, Transferable Skills and Graduate attributes. Teaching and learning strategies also varied in length from a minimum of 1 paragraph to 5 pages of A4, however all included examples of teaching and learning strategies normally as a list of activities, including; lectures, on line learning, group work and self-directed learning/private study. All programmes

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